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Research Article

The Role of Gender Identity Threat in Perceptions of Date Rape and Sexual Coercion

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Christin L. Munsch[1] and Robb Willer[2]

Abstract

We experimentally investigated the effects of gender identity threat on men's and women's perceptions of date rape and sexual coercion. Results showed that men whose masculinity was threatened responded by blaming the victim and exonerating the perpetrator more, while threatened women respond by blaming male perpetrators more and placing less blame on female victims. Men's response to threats was more pronounced than women's, an asymmetry we attribute to the cultural devaluation of femininity. Our findings highlight the significance of masculinity concerns in perceptions of sexual violence and, more generally, the importance of perceiver context in views of violence against women.

Keywords

date rape, perceptions, sexual coercion

Understanding what factors impact the way people view violence against women is important for a variety of reasons. First, these crimes have extremely low reporting rates compared to other crimes (Koss & Cook, 1993; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), and low reporting may stem in part from public perceptions of victims of date rape and sexual coercion. For example, beliefs that rape victims are to blame for their assault may alter individuals' likelihood to view what happened as rape, notify the police, and report incidents to researchers (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Public perceptions also affect outcomes for both victims and perpetrators. The opinions of police officers, prosecutors, juries, and judges have a real impact on the treatment of victims and the disciplinary actions taken against perpetrators. The attitudes of friends, family, physicians, therapists, and community members can also

[1]Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
[2]University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Christin L. Munsch, Stanford University, Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research, 589 Capistrano Way, Serra House, Stanford, CA 94305, USA
Email: clm73@stanford.edu

shape social aspects of the recovery process for victims. Finally, the dynamics shaping attitudes toward violence against women likely impact public policy, as attitudes held by society at large influence what is criminalized as well as the availability of assistance and services for victims (Nayak, Byrne, Martin, & Abraham, 2003).

Although research on perceptions of date rape and sexual coercion has received a great deal of attention from social scientists, the underlying assumption throughout much of this work is that individual perceptions are largely static. Besides the effect of alcohol consumption (e.g., Abbey, Buck, Zawacki, & Saenz, 2003) and prevention programs (e.g., Foubert & Perry, 2007), few studies have examined the construction of attitudes regarding sexual aggression as part of an interactional process subject to change in response to contextual or situational forces. Given the lack of information about processes shaping the formation of attitudes about date rape and sexual coercion, and recent literature that suggests men who harm women might do so when their sense of masculinity is threatened (Atkinson, Greenstein, & Lang, 2005; Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003; Macmillan & Gartner, 1999; Messerschmidt, 2000; Perlata, Tuttle, & Steele, 2010), we conducted an experiment to evaluate the claim that threatened gender identity affects individuals' views of heterosexual male-on-female sexual aggression. Based on social identity theory (Hogg, 1992; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we anticipate that gender identity threats will lead men to view female victims as more responsible in these settings, while women will view male perpetrators as more responsible. Given the hierarchical nature of gender (Connell, 1995; Johnson, 2005), however, we expect the effects of gender identity threat to be asymmetrical, with the impact of threats being less pronounced among women than among men. More generally, our analysis seeks to demonstrate the importance of interactional factors in understanding how attitudes about date rape and sexual coercion are formed.

Past Research on Perceptions of Date Rape and Sexual Coercion

Rape is defined as forced sexual intercourse that occurs against one's will and without consent (Gill, 1996). The large majority of rapes are perpetrated by someone the victim knows (Pfeiffer, 1990; Thompson, 1995), a form of assault referred to as "date rape" or "acquaintance rape." Previous research on date rape has traditionally focused on (a) how perceiver characteristics affect perceptions, and (b) how manipulated aspects of date rape scenarios affect perceptions. Regarding perceiver characteristics, one of the most consistent findings has been that men assign more blame to victims, and less blame to perpetrators, than women (Bascow & Minieri, 2010; Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Black & Gold, 2008; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Hannon, Kuntz, Van Laar, Williams, & Hall, 1996; Hattery Freetly & Kane 1995; Monson, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Binderup 2000; Varelas & Foley, 1998; Workman & Freeburg, 1999). Race also plays a significant role in how individuals perceive date rape. Varelas and Foley (1998) found that White participants were more likely than Black participants to attribute responsibility to perpetrators and to believe victims should notify authorities. Personal ideologies further influence date rape perceptions. Individuals who hold traditional gender-role stereotypes (Abrams, Viki,

Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Simonson & Subich, 1999), who are high in Benevolent Sexism (Abrams et al., 2003; Viki & Abrams, 2002), and who endorse "rape myths" (Bascow & Minieri, 2010; Frese, Moya, & Megias, 2004; Varelas & Foley, 1998) are more likely to blame victims and exonerate perpetrators.

A second interest of scholars has been to investigate how various aspects of the date rape scenario influence people's understanding of date rape. For example, people tend to find forced intercourse more acceptable in more intimate relationships and in relationships of longer duration (Hattery Freetly & Kane 1995; Yescavage, 1999). People also tend to find forced intercourse less acceptable in situations that involve victim resistance (e.g., Black & Gold, 2008; Hannon et al., 1996; Hattery Freetly & Kane, 1995). Other research finds that Black perpetrators (Varelas & Foley, 1998; Willis, 1992), perpetrators of lower socioeconomic status (Black & Gold, 2008), and perpetrators with previous criminal histories (Wild, Graham, & Rehm, 1998) are assigned more blame than White perpetrators, perpetrators of higher socioeconomic status, and perpetrators without previous criminal records. On the other hand, Black victims (Varelas & Foley, 1998; Willis, 1992), victims who have been drinking or who have voluntarily consumed drugs (Girard & Senn, 2008; Maurer & Robinson, 2008; Stormo, Lang, & Stritzke, 1997; Wild et al., 1998), and victims who dress or behave provocatively (Cassidy & Hurrell, 1995; Maurer & Robinson, 2008; Workman & Freeburg, 1999) are thought to be more blameworthy.

Recently, scholars have begun to ask similar questions regarding perceptions of sexual coercion. Sexual coercion is "the act of pursing sexual contact with a person after he or she has refused an initial advance" (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003, p. 78). By and large, women tend to object to the use of sexual coercion more than men (Black & Gold, 2003; Haworth-Hoeppner, 1998; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1991) and tend to define more behaviors as sexually coercive (Garcia, Milano, & Quijano, 1989; Haworth-Hoeppner, 1998). Likewise, people with less traditional gender role orientations tend to express greater disapproval of sexual coercion (Haworth-Hoeppner, 1998).

Coercion scholars have also considered how factors related to the specific scenario affect individuals' perceptions. Not surprisingly, more forceful sexually coercive strategies are viewed less positively (Black & Gold, 2003; Cartar, Hicks, & Slane, 1996; Garcia et al., 1989; Hannon et al., 1996; Haworth-Hoeppener, 1998; Oswald & Russell, 2006; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1993) and people are more accepting of sexual coercion as relationship duration and intensity increase (Faulkner, Kolts, & Hicks, 2008; Haworth-Hoeppener, 1998). Moreover, both men and women are more supportive of coercive strategies in certain situations, particularly during intense sexual activity, when sexual activity has occurred in the past, or when sexual intercourse was initially agreed on and then was rescinded (Haworth-Hoeppner, 1998; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1991; Van Wie & Gross, 2001). The attractiveness of perpetrators has also been manipulated, exposing a beauty bias such that attractive perpetrators are viewed less negatively than unattractive perpetrators (Cartar et al., 1996; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994). Similarly, people view sexual advances by wealthy individuals as more acceptable than sexual advances by poorer individuals (Black & Gold, 2003).

Studies of sexual coercion have also experimentally manipulated victim and perpetrator gender. For example, Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1993) asked participants to imagine an uninvited sexual advance from either a same-gender or opposite-gender acquaintance. They found that women anticipated they would experience strong negative effects from both a hypothetical opposite-gender advance and a hypothetical same-gender advance. Men, on the other hand, anticipated almost no negative effects from an opposite-gender advance but did expect strong negative effects from a same-gender advance. Other research has found that men who coerce are viewed as aggressive, whereas women who coerce are viewed as promiscuous (Oswald & Russell, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

As the above review suggests, research on perceptions of date rape and sexual coercion is quite extensive. The underlying assumption throughout much of this research, however, is that individual perceptions regarding date rape and sexual coercion are largely static. Although perceptions vary across unique individuals, and perceptions vary in accordance with manipulated contextual factors, it is assumed that the same individual assessing the same scenario will view the situation in largely the same way time and again. Yet attitude formation is a dynamic process and it is likely that a perceiver's situation could lead him or her to view the same scenario very differently. Our theoretical framework draws on the tradition of social identity theory (SIT; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT views people's perceptions of themselves and others as a product of the everyday negotiations of meaning that occur between individuals, and views these negotiations as a dynamic process that occurs as people interpret and react to the world around them.

Social Identity Theory and Threats to Social Identity

Scholars who study social identity have conceptualized race, ethnicity, political affiliation, and even sports teams as meaningful social identities (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Hogg, 1992; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identities have a set of attributes attached to them. These beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors make up a prototype or ideal representative of the group. Maintaining identification with groups that are important and meaningful serves to enhance self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Smith & Tyler, 1997) and threats to social identity have a number of negative consequences including decreased self-esteem, depression, stress, and antisocial behavior (Aquino & Douglas, 2003; Ethier & Deaux, 1994). For these reasons, individuals are motivated to maintain the legitimacy of their status as an in-group member. As a result, SIT predicts that threatened group members will behave in ways that serve to restore the legitimacy of their in-group status by adhering more strongly to their in-group ideals and by distancing themselves from relevant out-groups.

It is well established that gender is "one of the most important, salient, and pervasive social categories" (Maass et al., 2003, p. 854). We are interested in gender as a basis of social identity and how men and women react to gender identity threats. We apply Connell's

(Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) social theory of gender to SIT, specifically the conception of hegemonic masculinity as a monolithic prototype or ideal to which men strive (Lusher & Robins, 2009). Hegemonic masculinity, like identity prototypes, is not representative of any actual person, but rather is the most socially endorsed type of masculinity and an ideal set of prescriptive norms. The qualities associated with hegemonic masculinity vary historically and culturally. In contemporary Western society, the hegemonic ideal includes the traits of being heterosexual, White, monied, and self-possessed (Donaldson, 1993; Johnson, 2005; Kimmel, 1994; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). In other words, it is a reflection of the characteristics of the most prestigious and powerful. Although the powerful shape the standard, all men benefit (to varying degrees) from the prestige associated with this ideal when they act in ways that signify a masculine self. The ways in which different groups of boys and men in different social locations signify masculine selves varies. For example, African American boys learn to signify masculine selves by breaking rules and talking back to teachers (Ferguson, 2000), whereas business students learn to signify masculinity by appearing to be instrumentally oriented, rational, and able to manage subordinates (Sinclair, 1995). What these acts have in common is the ability to exert control and resist being controlled (Johnson, 2005). Fundamentally, hegemonic masculinity is marked by a tendency for men to dominate other men and subordinate women (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Given that hegemonic masculinity strongly encourages men—even marginalized men—to dominate and subordinate women, we suspect that men who receive a threat to their gender identity will compensate by expressing hegemonic masculine attitudes that reflect a greater valuation of men and masculinity relative to women and femininity. Previous research on actual violence lends credence to this prediction (Atkinson et al., 2005; Maass et al., 2003; Macmillan & Gartner, 1999; Messerschmidt, 2000; Perlata et al., 2010).

The Hierarchical Nature of Gender

Although social identity theory predicts that both men and women will behave in ways that exalt the in-group and derogate the out-group, there is little research investigating the effects of threatened femininity. Because femininity is relational and subordinate to masculinity (Connell, 1995; Johnson, 2005; Pascoe, 2007), it is likely that men and women will not behave similarly in response to threatened gender identity. Both men *and women* incur benefits from rejecting the feminine and embracing the masculine (Kane, 2006; Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007; Thorne, 1993). For example, in her ethnographic work on high school masculinity, Pascoe (2007) finds that rejecting stereotypical markers of femininity (e.g., women's clothing, passivity, acquiescence) and engaging in practices stereotypically associated with masculinity (e.g., athletic participation, men's clothing, fighting) increases respect and social status for girls. The same gender nonconformity is not rewarded among adolescent boys. For them, assuming feminine traits leads to derogation and ostracism.

As social identity theory predicts, we expect that both men and women will respond to threatened gender identity with attitudes and behaviors reflecting support for their

in-group. Yet, given the subordinate nature of femininity to masculinity, we predict that this reaction to gender identity threat will be stronger in men than women. While rejecting the feminine allows both men and women to move from a position of inferiority to a position of superiority, for women this involves rejection of a valued group identity.

Hypotheses

The primary goal of this article is to explore the relationship between threatened masculinity and attitudes about date rape and sexual coercion. Specifically, we examine the effect of directly manipulating gender identity threat on attitudes, including victim derogation and perpetrator exoneration. We predict that male participants whose gender identity is threatened, when subsequently presented with male-on-female sexual assault vignettes, will (a) assign less blame to the perpetrator, (b) assign more blame to the victim, (c) report that the perpetrator was more justified in his actions, (d) report that the victim was less justified in her actions, (e) report liking the perpetrator more, (f) report liking the victim less, and (g) advise a less severe punishment for the perpetrator, compared to male participants receiving gender identity confirming feedback. We also examine women's response to threatened femininity. Although SIT suggests that both men and women will engage in gender identity compensation, the hierarchical nature of gender suggests that women who experience gender identity threat will be less motivated to engage in compensatory behaviors. Thus, while women whose gender identity is challenged are expected to exhibit more positive attitudes toward female targets—and negative attitudes toward male targets—we anticipate that these effects will be weaker for women than for men.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students at the university where the study was conducted. Given this convenience sample, the study findings are not directly, statistically generalizable to larger populations. Yet, this is a reasonable population in which to begin investigating the effect of gender identity threat on sexual assault perceptions. A number of studies have documented high rates of date rape and sexual coercion among college men (e.g., Sanday, 1990, Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Thus, understanding the perception of these events among college students may be especially important.

Ninety-seven undergraduate students at Cornell University participated in the study for pay (88%) or extra credit in an introductory sociology class (12%). Four participants did not open the envelope containing their gender identity survey feedback, thus they were not exposed to either condition. Additionally, during debriefing, 2 participants acknowledged that they heard about the study prior to participation and knew the gender identity feedback was false. These 6 participants were removed from analysis, yielding a total of 91 participants (36 men and 55 women).[1] First-year students made up 20% of the sample; 30% were sophomores, 25% were juniors, and 25% were seniors. In the sample, 60% were White or

European American, 6% were African American, 19% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 15% belonged to other racial or ethnic groups, were of mixed race, or did not know their race. The sample was 6% Hispanic. This distribution is consistent with the overall undergraduate population at this university. The participants represented a wide range of disciplines and only 16% of participants were social science majors (e.g., anthropology, communication, economics, human development, psychology, sociology).

Measures and Procedure

One student participated in the experiment at a time and participation lasted approximately 45 min. Participants were first given a "Gender Identity Survey." The Gender Identity Survey was drawn from the Bem (1974) Sex Roles Inventory and includes 60 adjectives thought to possess cultural associations with masculinity (e.g., "competitive"), femininity (e.g., "compassionate"), or neither masculinity nor femininity (e.g., "unpredictable"). Each participant indicated how much he or she could be described by each on a scale from 1 (never or almost never true) to 7 (always or almost always true).

After completing the Gender Identity Survey, participants were told that the experimenter would score the responses and provide feedback to the participant. In the meantime, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. After approximately 5 min the experimenter returned and handed the participant a sealed envelope with the participant's name written on the front. The experimenter told the participant that the results of his or her gender identity survey were in the envelope and that he or she "should feel free to look at them now."

In actuality, participants were randomly assigned to receive either gender confirming (i.e., nonthreatening) feedback or gender disconfirming (i.e., threatening) feedback. The envelope contained participants' supposed gender identity score and a number line from 0 to 50 indicating the average male range and average female range of gender identity scores. The number line was marked with an X corresponding to the participant's supposed gender identity score. Male participants assigned to the gender identity confirming condition received a score at the midpoint of the average male range (11); those assigned to the gender identity disconfirming condition received a score slightly within the average female range (32). Women received a score at the midpoint of the female range (39) or slightly within the male range (18). The experimenter was blind to the participant's condition. This method has been successfully used in the past to threaten the gender identities of experimental participants (Maass et al., 2003; Willer, 2005).

The experimenter left the participant with his or her results for approximately 1 min and retrieved the next survey, the "Campus Climate Survey," which contained our dependent variables. Participants were told that the experimenters were interested in studying student-run judicial systems and the survey was designed to assess what behaviors students found illicit and punishable. The survey contained eight vignettes of incidents that ostensibly were brought before a judicial board at another university, one of which depicted a date rape and one of which depicted an incident of sexual coercion. The order of presentation was randomly counterbalanced across participants so that the vignette order would not affect participant responses.

We developed the Campus Climate Survey for this study, but borrowed portions of it from previous vignette studies. Specifically, the date rape vignette was loosely based on a vignette used to study alcohol consumption and sexual activity (Corcoran & Thomas, 1991) and the sexual coercion vignette was developed by Shelley Correll and Jeremy Freese and is part of an unpublished ongoing project. Although many studies of date rape and sexual coercion have accumulated over the years, disagreements continue as to how to define these terms. In the date rape vignette, we rely on Gill's (1996) definition of date rape as "sexual intercourse that occurs against the will of the victim and without her consent. Without consent can include, but is not limited to . . . [situations in which] the victim resists verbally or physically" (p. 29). The date rape vignette fits this definition in that sexual intercourse occurs and the victim resists, albeit modestly. Moreover, feminist definitions of rape have proposed reducing the requirement that extreme force by the aggressor or extreme resistance by the victim be demonstrated (e.g., Bechhofer & Parrott, 1991; Hannon et al., 1996), leading to significant changes in legal definitions of rape in several states (Hannon et al., 1996).

It is also worth noting that the ending of the vignette was intentionally left ambiguous, a strategy employed in other date rape perception studies (e.g., Abbey et al., 2003), which we adopted for two reasons. First, this situation has ecological validity. Most sexual assaults, particularly among college students, occur in dating situations and often after some consensual sexual activity (Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Harrington & Leitenberg, 1994). Second, we were concerned that if we explicitly referred to the incident as rape within the vignette, social desirability pressures would lead all participants to blame the perpetrator maximally making it impossible for us to observe effects for our variables of interest.

Regarding our sexual coercion vignette, there are a number of specific behaviors we might have chosen to illustrate the coercive nature of the interaction. Struckman-Johnson et al. (2003) identified 19 specific tactics as sexually coercive. Consistent with their definition, our sexual coercion vignette makes clear that the male character has pursued sexual contact after the female character has refused his initial advance and it depicts one of these 19 behaviors: threatening to end the romantic relationship. Other research has also identified this as a sexually coercive tactic (e.g., Struckman-Johnson & Stuckman-Johnson, 1998; Zurbriggen, 2000). The date rape and sexual coercion vignettes are attached as Appendix.[2]

Participants read each vignette and were asked to assign a percentage of responsibility to each individual in the vignette as well as to "other/extraneous" factors, so that the overall assignment of responsibility totaled 100%. Participants were also asked how justified and how likeable he or she found each character on a 7-point scale (1 = not justified/likeable at all; 7 = very justified/likeable) and what punishment the university judicial board should impose on the individuals involved (no punishment; probation, next violation leads to suspension; suspension from the university for 1 year; permanent dismissal from the university).

We also analyzed the remaining six vignettes, which involved individuals who had engaged in academic cheating, alcohol and drug use, fighting, breaking and entering,

damage to university property, and downloading music illegally. We expect threatened masculinity to elicit the predicted effects for date rape and sexual coercion, but we expect no effects for these other violent or criminal activities. These scenarios allow participants to make gender-based distinctions that the other vignettes do not. Specifically, they offer threatened men the opportunity to simultaneously identify with the in-group and distance themselves from the out-group. In so doing, the men are able to move from a position of inferiority to a position of superiority.

To assess manipulation believability, participants were given a "Post-Study Questionnaire" which included the open-ended question, "Was there anything you found hard to believe about the study?" More than 90% of the participants responded with some form of "no." Similarly, the experimenter was instructed during debriefing to probe for information regarding the participant's reaction to the gender identity feedback. Two participants indicated that they did not believe the feedback and thus were removed from the analysis.

Results

First, we analyze results for participants' responses on the Gender Identity Survey to make sure conditions were equivalent with regard to gender identity. We then compare means for our dependent variables across condition within gender, to address whether or not men undergoing gender identity threat, compared to men not undergoing threat, tended to view perpetrators more positively and victims more negatively. We then present multivariate regression models to evaluate the effects of gender, threatened gender identity, and their interaction on perceptions of perpetrators and victims. In addition to allowing us to compare men's responses and women's responses across conditions, these models enable us to assess whether threatened gender identity affects men more than women.

Differences Between Conditions

We performed a series of comparisons for each of the items in the Gender Identity Survey to make sure that experimental conditions were equivalent with regard to gender identity. For men, there were significant differences on only two of the 60 items (based on a $p < .05$ standard of statistical significance); for women there were no significant differences between conditions. By this standard, we would expect 3 of the 60 items to be significantly different by condition. Therefore, we can be reasonably sure that gender identity prior to the experiment was distributed randomly across conditions.

Responsibility

Tables 1 and 2 provide means and standard deviations for the dependent variables for our date rape and sexual coercion vignettes.

The first two columns of Table 1 reveal date rape perceptions for men under gender identity threat as compared to men not under gender identity threat. As predicted, threatened men assigned significantly more responsibility to the female victim in the scenario than men

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Percentage of Responsibility Assigned, Likeability, Justifiability, and Suggested Punishment for the Victims and the Perpetrators in a Date Rape Vignette for Men and Women by Condition

	Men		Women	
	Confirmed	Disconfirmed	Confirmed	Disconfirmed
	N = 17	*N* = 19	*N* = 29	*N* = 26
% of responsibility assigned to victim	32.9** (17.1)	44.1** (10.2)	34.8** (18.6)	23.9** (19.6)
% of responsibility assigned to perpetrator	61.71* (20.2)	53.8* (8.06)	59.1** (18.7)	70.2** (20.3)
% of responsibility assigned to other/ extraneous factors	5.29 (8.56)	2.19 (6.57)	2.86 (7.63)	5.50 (10.7)
How justified is victim?	3.94*** (2.05)	2.50*** (1.26)	3.82* (1.89)	4.52* (1.74)
How justified is perpetrator?	3.12 (1.69)	3.50 (2.10)	2.32 (1.56)	1.93 (1.11)
How likable do you find victim?	3.53** (1.70)	2.50** (1.32)	3.32 (1.52)	3.56 (1.45)
How likable do you find perpetrator?	3.00 (1.73)	2.50 (1.41)	2.18** (1.12)	1.67** (.877)
Suggested punishment for perpetrator	2.29*** (1.05)	1.44*** (.63)	2.14** (.93)	2.58** (.809)

Note: *SD*s in parentheses. See text for variable descriptions. Asterisks indicate a significant difference in the means between condition and within gender.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

who did not receive threatening gender identity feedback, $t(34) = -1.71$, $p < .04$. Threatened men also assigned less responsibility to the date rape perpetrator than their nonthreatened counterparts, $t(34) = 1.02$, $p < .09$.

Table 2 displays men's perceptions of the victim and perpetrator in the sexual coercion vignette. In this scenario, men who received threatening gender identity feedback assigned approximately 42% of the total responsibility to the perpetrator, while men who did not receive threatening gender identity feedback assigned 64% of the total responsibility to the perpetrator, $t(34) = 1.93$, $p = .03$. Similarly, men not experiencing gender identity threat assigned about 34% of the responsibility to the victim compared to 58% assigned by men receiving gender identity threatening feedback, $t(34) = -2.06$, $p = .02$. Thus men in the study who did not experience a threat to their masculinity actually assigned the majority of responsibility for the incident to the perpetrator, whereas men experiencing a threat to their masculinity assigned the majority of responsibility to the victim. These results support our prediction that men whose gender identity is threatened will exhibit greater tendencies to exonerate perpetrators and derogate victims in sexual assault scenarios.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Percentage of Responsibility Assigned, Likeability, Justifiability, and Suggested Punishment for the Victims and the Perpetrators in a Sexual Coercion Vignette for Men and Women by Condition

	Men		Women	
	Confirmed	Disconfirmed	Confirmed	Disconfirmed
	N = 17	*N* = 19	*N* = 29	*N* = 26
% of responsibility assigned to victim	34.1*** (25.8)	58.1*** (30.5)	35.2*** (17.4)	19.7*** (17.3)
% of responsibility assigned to perpetrator	64.4** (24.7)	41.9** (30.5)	62.5*** (20.6)	79.0*** (18.2)
% of responsibility assigned to other/ extraneous factors	1.47* (4.24)	0*[a]	2.32 (9.57)	1.35 (5.93)
How justified is victim?	3.71* (1.83)	2.75* (1.65)	3.86 (1.74)	3.74 (1.95)
How justified is perpetrator?	2.35*** (1.22)	3.62*** (1.96)	1.93 (1.33)	1.63 (1.11)
How likable do you find victim?	3.82** (1.63)	2.50** (1.46)	3.46 (1.53)	3.59 (1.67)
How likable do you find perpetrator?	2.18* (1.33)	2.94* (1.69)	1.61** (.786)	1.19** (.622)
Suggested punishment for perpetrator	1.35 (.606)	1.25 (.437)	1.46** (.744)	1.85** (.818)

Note: *SD*s in parentheses. See text for variable descriptions. Asterisks indicate a significant difference in the means between condition and within gender.
[a]No participants in this condition assigned responsibility to other/extraneous factors.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

Justifiability, Likeability, and Punishment

Consistent with our prediction, men who received threatening gender identity feedback viewed the date rape victim as significantly less justified, $t(34) = 2.38$. $p = .04$ and as significantly less likeable $t(34) = 1.78$, $p = .01$, than men who did not receive gender identity disconfirming feedback. Threatened men also reported finding the sexual coercion victim less justified, $t(34) = 1.16$, $p = .10$, and liked the victim less, $t(34) = 1.81$, $p = .03$, than nonthreatened men.

With regard to perceptions of perpetrators, men who received threatening gender identity feedback viewed the sexual coercion perpetrators as more justified, $t(34) = -1.83$, $p = .03$, and more likeable, $t(34) = -1.23$, $p = .10$, than men who did not receive threatening feedback. However, the effects of gender identity threat on perpetrator justifiability, $t(34) = -1.46$, $p = .44$, and likeability, $t(34) = -1.22$, $p = .12$, in the date rape vignette were not

significant. This suggests that gender identity threat may affect men's perceptions of victims more than perpetrators, or that gender identity threat may affect men's perceptions of more ambiguous situations, like the sexual coercion scenario, more than less ambiguous situations, like the date rape scenario.

Participants were also asked to choose the punishment that they found most appropriate in each of the Campus Climate Survey scenarios: no punishment; probation, next violation leads to suspension; suspension from the university for 1 year; and permanent dismissal from the university. We expected that men receiving threatening gender identity feedback would assign less severe punishments to perpetrators in the date rape and sexual coercion vignettes. In the date rape vignette (Table 1), this prediction was supported, $t(34) = 2.44$, $p = .01$. In the sexual coercion vignette (Table 2) this prediction was not supported, $t(34) = .51$, $p = .31$; however, this is likely due to the fact that there was very little variance on this measure. Few respondents felt that the sexual coercion perpetrator should be punished at all. We now turn to the analysis of gender identity threat on women's perceptions of these same vignettes.

Threatened Femininity

We expected that women undergoing gender identity threat would assign a greater proportion of responsibility to perpetrators, a smaller proportion of responsibility to victims, report liking the victim more and the perpetrator less, perceive the victim to be more justified in her actions and the perpetrator to be less justified in his actions, and assign a harsher punishment to the perpetrator in both the date rape and sexual coercion vignette, as compared to their counterparts not experiencing gender identity threat. However, we did not expect women to react as strongly to threatened gender identity as men. Our results largely confirm these predictions.

The last two columns of Table 1 compare gender identity threatened women to nonthreatened women and show that women whose gender identity was threatened assigned significantly less blame (approximately 11% less) to the date rape victim compared to women whose gender identity was not threatened, $t(53) = 2.19$, $p = .02$. In the sexual coercion vignette (Table 2), women who received threatening gender identity feedback, assigned on average 15% less blame to the victim than did women not receiving this feedback, $t(53) = 3.43$, $p < .001$).

Conversely, in the date rape vignette (Table 1), women experiencing gender identity threat assigned an average of 11% more responsibility to the perpetrator compared to women not experiencing gender identity threat, $t(53) = -2.15$, $p = .02$. In the sexual coercion vignette (Table 2), this difference is stronger, with threatened women assigning approximately 16% more responsibility to the perpetrator than nonthreatened women, $t(53) = -3.23$, $p < .001$. Thus, as predicted, threatened women attributed less responsibility to victims and more responsibility to perpetrators of sexual assault compared to their nonthreatened counterparts.

Table 1 also gives results for justifiability and likeability with respect to the date rape vignette for female participants. Consistent with our predictions, women who received

threatening gender identity feedback viewed the date rape victim as more justified in her actions, $t(53) = -1.57$, $p = .06$. There were no significant differences in the assessment of victim likeability, $t(53) = -.71$, $p = .24$, or perpetrator justifiability, $t(53) = 1.16$, $p = .12$. However, women undergoing gender identity threat did report finding the perpetrator significantly less likeable than women who did not undergo gender identity threat, $t(53) = 1.89$, $p = .03$. For sexual coercion, the results for perpetrator likeability confirmed our predictions: threatened women liked the perpetrator less than nonthreatened women, $t(53) = 2.12$, $p = .02$; however, the results for victim likeability, $t(53) = -2.59$, $p = .40$, and victim justifiability, $t(53) = -.248$, $p = .41$, and perpetrator justifiability, $t(53) = 1.11$, $p = .14$, did not confirm our predictions.

Finally, we expected women receiving threatening gender identity feedback to assign harsher punishments to perpetrators in the date rape and sexual coercion vignettes. These predictions were supported, $t(53) = -1.99$, $p = .02$ and $t(53) = -1.94$, $p = .03$, respectively. This is especially interesting given that very few men (threatened and nonthreatened) suggested any punishment for the sexual coercion perpetrator.

Multivariate Analyses

Our multivariate models evaluate the prediction that women will be less affected by the gender identity threatening feedback than men. OLS regression models were used with gender and gender identity threat as dummy variables. Men and threat were coded as 1.

The estimated regression coefficients and robust standard errors for the effects of the independent variables are presented in Tables 3 and 4. The significant, positive interaction effect for victim responsibility in Table 3 indicates that the relationship between gender identity threat and victim responsibility for date rape is different for men and women. To assess the magnitude of the difference between conditions for each gender, we use the estimated regression coefficients to calculate the predicted values for each condition. Although the direction of the effect was different for men and women, we found no difference in the magnitude of the effect of gender identity threat between men and women on the assignment of responsibility to date rape perpetrators or victims (both men and women showed effects of about 11 percentage points).

However, the remaining items with significant interaction effects do support our hypotheses. For example, we find that men not under gender identity threat rated the date rape victim's justifiability score 1.44 points higher (on a 7-point scale) than men under gender identity threat, whereas women not experiencing threatened gender identity assigned the victim an average score 0.7 points lower on the same scale as compared to their nonthreatened counterparts. The magnitude of the difference for men is more than twice that of the difference for women. Similarly, with respect to suggested punishment on the date rape vignette, we find the magnitude of the difference for men between conditions to be approximately twice that of the difference for women between conditions; and the magnitude of difference for men's victim likeability to be more than 4 times the difference for women. Overall, we find that threatened gender identity has a larger effect on men's date rape responses than women's responses.

Table 3. Estimated Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors) for the Effect of Gender and Gender Identity Threat on Percentage of Responsibility Assigned, Likeability, Justifiability, and Suggested Punishment for the Victim and the Perpetrator in Date Rape Vignette (N = 91)

	% of responsibility assigned to victim	% of responsibility assigned to perpetrator	How justified is victim?	How justified is perpetrator?	How likable do you find victim?	How likable do you find perpetrator?	Suggested punishment for perpetrator
Male	−1.88	2.60	.120	.796	.208	.821**	.151
	(5.35)	(5.57)	(.547)	(.486)	(.461)	(.386)	(.268)
Disconfirm	−10.9**	11.0**	.697	−.396	.234	−.512	.434*
	(4.74)	(4.94)	(.480)	(.426)	(.405)	(.338)	(.238)
Male ×	22.0***	−19.0**	−2.14***	.778	−1.26*	.012	−1.29***
Disconfirm	(7.69)	(8.01)	(.784)	(.696)	(.661)	(.552)	(.386)
Intercept	34.8***	59.1***	3.82***	2.32***	3.32***	2.18***	2.14***
	(3.23)	(3.43)	(.336)	(.299)	(.283)	(.237)	(.165)
R^2	.143	.101	.134	.132	.064	.131	.172

Note: *SE*s in parentheses. All values reported to three significant digits. See text for variable descriptions.
*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.

Table 4. Estimated Regression Coefficients (and Standard Errors) for the Effects of Gender and Gender Identity threats on Percentage of Responsibility Assigned, Likeability, Justifiability, and Suggested Punishment for the Victim and the Perpetrator in Sexual Coercion Vignette (N = 91)

	% of responsibility assigned to victim	% of responsibility assigned to perpetrator	How justified is victim?	How justified is perpetrator?	How likable do you find victim?	How likable do you find perpetrator?	Suggested punishment for perpetrator
Male	−1.06	1.91	−.151	.442	.359	.569	−.111
	(6.77)	(7.05)	(.556)	(.427)	(.486)	(.332)*	(.215)
Disconfirm	−15.5**	16.5***	−.116	−.299	.128	−.422	.388**
	(6.00)	(6.24)	(.488)	(.374)	(.426)	(.292)	(.189)
Male ×	39.5***	−39.0***	−.839	1.57***	−1.45**	1.18**	−.491
Disconfirm	(9.74)	(10.1)	(.797)	(.611)	(.696)	(.476)	(.309)
Intercept	35.2***	62.5***	3.86***	1.93***	3.46***	1.60***	1.46***
	(4.16)	(4.33)	(.342)	(.262)	(.299)	(.204)	(.132)
R^2	.267	.240	.049	.213	.075	.259	.102

Note: *SE*s in parentheses. All values reported to three significant digits. See text for variable descriptions.
*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.

Next, we turn to the magnitude of the difference between conditions by gender for responses to the sexual coercion vignette. Using the values in Table 4 to calculate the predicted values for victim responsibility for men and for women, we find a difference of 24% between the two conditions for men, compared to a difference of 16% for women. In other words, the predicted values show that threatened men assign approximately 24% more blame to the victim compared to nonthreatened men, whereas threatened women assign approximately 16% less blame to the victim compared to nonthreatened women. This supports our prediction that threatened gender identity has a larger effect on men than on women.

Similarly, we find a difference of about 23% across conditions for perpetrator responsibility on the sexual coercion vignette for men, compared to only 17% for women. For sexual coercion perpetrator likeability, the difference in magnitude for men between conditions is almost 3.5 times greater than the difference for women between conditions. For perpetrator justifiability, the difference for men is more than 4 times greater than the difference for women. And the magnitude of difference for men on victim likeability is more than 10 times the difference for women. Again, while one effect was of about the same magnitude (i.e., victim and perpetrator responsibility on the date rape vignette), we see that typically the effects of gender identity threat were stronger for men than for women.

Other Campus Offenses

The Campus Climate Survey included six additional vignettes about academic cheating, alcohol and drug use, fighting, breaking and entering, damage to university property, and downloading music illegally. We included these in an effort to rule out an alternative hypothesis: that threatened gender identity leads to perpetrator exoneration and victim derogation among men, and perpetrator derogation and victim exoneration among women, regardless of whether or not the situation involves sexual violence against women. The effects of gender identity threat for the remaining six vignettes were nonsignificant for both men and women. This provides evidence that the observed effects of threatened gender identity on men's and women's perceptions were unique to the gendered domain of heterosexual male-on-female sexual assault.

Discussion

There is an extensive body of work examining the effect of victim and perpetrator characteristics on perceptions of sexual assault. Yet the underlying assumption of this literature is that perceiver attitudes are relatively static. Our study, on the other hand, provides evidence that the same perpetrator or victim might be judged very differently depending on situational factors affecting the perceiver. Specifically, we investigated the effect of gender identity threat on perceptions about victims and perpetrators in date rape and sexual coercion vignettes. We hypothesized that men whose masculinity was threatened would express more favorable attitudes toward male perpetrators and express less favorable attitudes toward female victims than their nonthreatened counterparts. This was largely true: across the 14 dependent variables eight of the comparisons were significant at the .05 level, whereas an additional three of the comparisons were significant at the .10 level, all in the predicted direction. We found that men whose masculinity was threatened assigned significantly more blame to both the date rape and the sexual coercion victims, assigned significantly less blame to both the date rape and sexual coercion perpetrators, reported liking the date rape and sexual coercion victims less, rated the date rape and sexual coercion victims as less justified in their actions, and rated the sexual coercion perpetrator as more likeable and more justified in his actions. They also suggested less severe punishments for the date rape perpetrator, compared to their nonthreatened counterparts.

Of the three insignificant effects, we were not surprised by one (punishment in the sexual coercion vignette) as it is unlikely that people typically view sexual coercion as a formally punishable offense. The lack of significance for the remaining two variables (perpetrator justifiability and likeability in the date rape vignette) suggests that perceptions of victims might be more susceptible to gender identity manipulations than perceptions of perpetrators, or that less ambiguous scenarios are less susceptible to perception manipulation. Overall, however, the results support our claim that men compensate in response to threatened gender identity by shifting their perceptions of victims and perpetrators in date rape and sexual coercion vignettes.

We also hypothesized that women whose femininity was threatened would express more favorable attitudes toward female victims and less favorable attitudes toward male perpetrators than their nonthreatened counterparts. By and large, results supported this hypothesis as well. Nine of our 14 predictions were supported at the .05 level with an additional prediction supported at the .10 level. Women experiencing a threat to their femininity, compared to nonthreatened participants, assigned significantly more responsibility to both the date rape and sexual coercion perpetrators, assigned significantly less responsibility to both the date rape and sexual coercion victims, reported liking both the date rape and sexual coercion perpetrators less, reported finding the date rape victim more justified in her actions, and suggested harsher punishments for both the date rape and sexual coercion perpetrators. Given the strength of the effect across a diverse set of measures we conclude that threatening women's femininity led to compensation in the form of expressing sympathetic attitudes about victims and negative attitudes about perpetrators.

We also anticipated that men would react more strongly to the threatening gender identity feedback than women because masculinity is more culturally valued than femininity. This prediction was also supported.

Despite these findings, there are several limitations of the present research. First, we chose to examine date rape and sexual coercion vignettes, but other forms of violence against women were not examined. It could be the case that gender identity threats more readily impact the perceptions of victims and perpetrators of violence against women for certain kinds of violence but not others. Second, not all participants may have felt threatened. The procedure used in the study served as a proxy for manipulating gender identity threat. Some participants presumed to be threatened might have received information that was accurate (e.g., feminine males, masculine females). Therefore, it is possible that the findings were driven by those individuals who identify as masculine having been told that they were feminine and those individuals who identify as feminine having been told that they were masculine. Finally, the experiment was conducted at a primarily private research institution in the northeast. Although the composition of the participants resembled the overall university population with respect to age, race, and ethnicity, there is no reason to believe that the findings are directly generalizable to college students or the general public.

However, while our study by necessity has limited external validity, it has strong internal validity. Our use of an experimental research design allowed us to manipulate our key variable of interest, gender identity threat, while holding constant potential confounding situational factors. Furthermore, the use of random assignment to conditions allowed us to control for potential confounding effects of participant-level factors such as personality,

self-esteem, and race. Future work should examine the effect of gender identity threat on perceptions of date rape and sexual coercion in a more diverse and generalizable sample as well as investigate the important ways in which different demographic groups construct masculinity in ways that might moderate the effects we observed.

Appendix

Date Rape Vignette

Ethan and Lisa are college seniors who met at a party given by a mutual friend. They spent most of the party talking and dancing with each other and, when the evening was over, they made plans to get together for a few drinks on Friday. Ethan came by Lisa's house and they walked to a nearby bar. The bar was fairly crowded when they arrived, but they managed to find a booth toward the back. Initially, they both seemed a little uneasy and made a lot of small talk about the weather and the day's happenings. When the waitress came, Ethan and Lisa both ordered drinks. As the evening progressed, they both became more talkative, freely expressing their views on movies, books, school, politics, and any other topic which came up between them. Their conversation flowed easily and they both seemed to enjoy each other's company. After Lisa and Ethan had a few drinks, it was getting late. Ethan walked Lisa home, went inside with her, and started to fool around. After kissing for some time, Ethan attempted to escalate the sexual activity. Suddenly, Lisa said she was getting tired and did not want to fool around anymore. Ethan continued to escalate the sexual activity and Lisa put up almost no resistance. He undressed her and had sex with her.

Sexual Coercion Vignette

Rob and Amy are college sophomores who meet at a party and begin dating. Things were going so well that Amy began to tell her friends that she was falling in love with him. A problem, however, was that Amy had never had sex, while Rob had had sex with two previous girlfriends. Rob very much wanted to have sexual intercourse with Amy. While Amy was willing to engage in sexual activities with Rob that did not involve intercourse, he kept asking her to have intercourse and she kept telling him that she did not feel ready. One night after they had dated for 6 weeks, Rob told Amy that unless she had sex with him that night, he was no longer interested in dating her. Amy began to cry and was clearly very upset, but then, only because she very much wanted her relationship with Rob to continue, she agreed. Rob knew that Amy really did not want to have sex, but he went ahead and had (protected) intercourse with Amy anyway.

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Notes

1. The smaller male sample size is due to common difficulties in scheduling male participants. To assess whether the sample size was acceptable for the statistical tests to be run, we conducted a post hoc power analysis. Using the mean effect size across dependent variables and assuming the effect size in the sample is equal to the effect size in the population, the results revealed a power of .95, which would require a sample size of about 78 cases (Cohen, 1988). As demonstrated in the article, the smaller male sample size was sufficient to detect differences between conditions.
2. We did not measure whether participants viewed the vignettes as date rape, coerced sex, or consensual sex. Previous research demonstrates that college students have difficultly correctly labeling sexual aggression scenarios (Hannon et al., 1996). Furthermore, our primary prediction is that perceptions will change in response to gender identity threat; thus it is possible that participants would have been more or less likely to view the situations as date rape and sexual assault depending on their assigned condition.

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Bios

Christin L. Munsch is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University with interests in gender, sexuality, social psychology and violence. She has worked in domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, and as a women's advocate. Christin recently completed her dissertation on threatened masculinity and compensatory behaviors, including violence against women and antigay violence.

Robb Willer is assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. His research areas include social psychology, gender, collective action, and political psychology. His research has appeared in the *American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology, Social Psychology Quarterly*, and *Annual Review of Sociology*.